

VZCZCXRO6903  
PP RUEHBZ RUEH DU RUEHGI RUEHJO RUEHMA RUEHMR RUEHPA RUEHRN RUEHTRO  
DE RUEHAN #0198 0820920  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
P 230920Z MAR 09  
FM AMEMBASSY ANTANANARIVO  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 2229  
INFO RUEHZO/AFRICAN UNION COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS ANTANANARIVO 000198

SENSITIVE  
SIPDIS

DEPT FOR AF/E AND AF/FO

E.O. 12958: N/A  
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [EAID](#) [CN](#) [FR](#)  
SUBJECT: France's Last African Colony Votes

REF: 08 ANTANANARIVO 716

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: The island of Mayotte, governed by France but claimed by the Union of the Comoros since independence in 1975, will vote March 29 in a "consultation" to become a French Overseas Department. Most observers expect the overwhelming majority of Maorais to vote in favor of becoming a Department, preferring subsidies to autonomy. Comorans on the three independent islands will protest to express their outrage. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) Mayotte is France's last colonial territory in Africa, governed under "Overseas Collectivity" status which is neither Territory nor Department in the French system. Mayotte's population of 200,000 includes "European" and Reunionais minorities, indigenous Maorais and ethnic Comoran French citizens, and tens of thousands of illegal immigrants from the Comoros. Mayotte has a high degree of autonomy, with much Shari'a Law incorporated into legal codes, tolerance of polygamy, local language instruction in schools, and significant authority of local government under the Prefect and General Council. Most observers expect the vote to pass by a wide margin, indicating Maorais willingness to give up autonomy for the increased subsidies from France that are expected to come with Department status. According to the French Ambassador to the Comoros, Paris has attempted to inform Maorais voters of the potential negative consequences that may come with diminished autonomy. Ambassador Hallade also told Comoros Officer, contrary to Comoran press reports, that even in the event of a "yes" vote, it will take many years for Mayotte's laws and institutions to be reformed to qualify to be a Department -- at great expense to the GOF (REFTEL). According to French colleagues in the Comoros, a 2000 French National Assembly resolution granted Mayotte this right of self-determination.

¶3. (SBU) The vast majority of Comorans on the independent islands of Grande Comore, Anjouan, and Moheli maintain an emotional claim that Mayotte belongs to the Comoros. One former Minister recently quipped, "We raise our children from an early age to believe France stole Mayotte from us." Comorans are virtually unanimous in their belief that international law is on their side and Mayotte should be returned to them. Signs around Moroni declare "Mayotte is Comoros and will be forever," and there is an active "Mayotte Committee" that constantly pressures the Union Government to do more to pressure France to give the island back.

¶4. (SBU) Under this popular pressure, President Sambi has mentioned Mayotte in his speeches to the UN General Assembly, but foreign ministry contacts have told us the proper procedural steps have never been followed to even request to have Mayotte officially on the UNGA agenda. Comoran officials often cite the 1976 draft UN Security Council Resolution that would have granted Comoros sovereignty over Mayotte; it was vetoed by France. During the recent Inter-Comoran Dialogue to address chronic institutional, governance and constitutional problems in the Comoros, several speakers blamed all of the country's problems on the Mayotte issue. One civil society speaker passionately exclaimed, "Once France returns Mayotte to the Comoros, we will be stable and prosperous!"

¶5. (SBU) The Mayotte issue permeates all aspects of Comoran life. A

mere 34 years since the islands parted ways, Mayotte's standard of living is about 10 times higher. Comorans resent needing a visa to travel to Mayotte (although Ambassador Hallade said 95 percent of these applications are approved). They protest illegal Comoran immigrants being expelled from Mayotte; officials at the port of entry often refuse to accept them upon return. Hundreds of Comorans die every year attempting to cross the treacherous seas between Anjouan and Mayotte to illegally immigrate. Another contact noted that in pre-colonial history the inhabitants of Mayotte were inferior to Grande Comore, even slaves, thus Grande Comorans resent these "lower castes" enjoying all the benefits in the Collectivity. As bizarre is the widely held Comoran belief that France has deliberately destabilized Comoros so that the country could never mount a serious claim to retake Mayotte.

COMMENT

-----

16. (SBU) Post has heard many hypothetical "strategic" reasons for which France kept Mayotte in 1975; none of them is very convincing. With La Reunion a French Department in the Indian Ocean, what need is there for Mayotte's costs and headaches? Perhaps the presence of a minority of European Catholics in Mayotte persuaded Paris to maintain Mayotte after 1975 and they have been stuck with it ever since. END COMMENT.

MARQUARDT